

TESTIMONY TO THE JUDICIAL SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE APPROPRIATIONS
COMMITTEE IN SUPPORT OF FUNDING LEGAL SERVICE AGENCIES

Submitted by Roger E. Bunker, Esq. of Bloomfield, CT

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My name is Roger E. Bunker. I am an attorney in private practice in Bloomfield. I am a 1994 graduate of the University of Connecticut Law School, which I entered shortly after my 50th birthday. I have spent the almost 15 years since graduation providing legal services to children and families involved in the juvenile justice system, child protection and, primarily for the last several years, in special education.

As you are well of the current financial catastrophe facing Connecticut's legal service agencies and its impact on their ability to provide services to our state's neediest and most underrepresented citizens, I will devote no more time to these subjects. Rather I will share with you why, based on personal experience, I believe these agencies must be supported and their critical services maintained.

As an older law school graduate, the traditional route of working as an associate with a law firm was not attractive to me. Instead, I received my early training by working with Greater Hartford Legal Aid, sometimes with pay, sometimes not. As a student I also interned with Connecticut Legal Services and assisted a juvenile court judge. After several years as a solo attorney in private practice, I worked for the Center for Children's Advocacy as Director of its Team Child Project, which, in cooperation with the Juvenile Public Defender's Office, provides legal representation to youths with special educational needs, who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

Therefore, throughout my career, I have been aware of the invaluable work provided to low income citizens by the talented and dedicated attorneys, who work in these agencies. They have chosen to forego the high remuneration obtained by other attorneys to seek justice and advocate for the poor. I believe, that their remuneration is less than that of attorneys employed by the state agencies. Without the services of these attorneys our poorest and most vulnerable citizens would lose housing, jobs, income, medical treatment, medication and would be unable to obtain the necessary educational services for their children. All of these needs become more widespread and critical in these difficult economic times. Therefore, we as citizens and you as legislators must at least maintain, if not increase, the availability of these services.

My particular passion is children and their education, which are the focus of my practice. I have represented many children and their families, whose incomes exceed the levels, which would qualify them for legal assistance from these legal service agencies. Like the clients of these agencies, many of these families cannot afford the fees charged by most private firms, are undereducated, unaware of their rights, and intimidated by educators and other authority figures. Therefore, on their own without the support of legal services,

poor families are unable to protect their rights and secure the educational supports and services their children require to be successful.

In addition to their cost, there are few private law firms that devote their time and efforts to the legal issues of children. In my opinion, legal services agencies are the largest repositories in Connecticut of the experience, knowledge and skills for the legal representation of children. Already, these agencies have long waiting lists for their services. I believe that the imbalance between supply and demand for services contributes substantially to two of Connecticut's most serious problems: the educational achievement gap and the disproportionate representation of minorities in our juvenile and adult correctional institutions. These problems have a common source, the inability of poor minority, primarily urban families to obtain appropriate education for their children. Unfortunately, in many cases legal representation is necessary to obtain an appropriate education. This is especially true in our poorer towns and cities in times when poorer school systems are under great financial strain. Students who do not receive the education they need are prime candidates for involvement in the justice system and future incarceration. Hence the achievement gap leads directly to overrepresentation of poor minorities in our justice and prison systems and to the ever increasing costs of these systems. Failure to fund the legal service agencies will surely increase the educational achievement gap, overrepresentation of minorities in Connecticut's justice and correction systems and the costs of these systems.

In summary, providing the requested support to Connecticut's legal service agencies is a democratic necessity: there is no value in having rights if you cannot protect them. Our most vulnerable citizens require these agencies to protect and secure their rights. This support is also a financial necessity as a decrease in the services these agencies provide will immediately impact the costs of our justice and correction systems, at much greater short and long term costs than the financing which is requested.

Thank you.